

A political strategy to fight the attack on workers' pensions in France

The World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board
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The following statement is being distributed by supporters of the WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International at mass demonstrations called for May 25 in opposition to the French government's plans to slash pensions and attack public education and health benefits. The statement is posted in leaflet form in French as a pdf file. We urge all of our readers and supporters in France to download the statement and distribute it at Sunday's rallies, and well as at work locations and other public venues.

The demonstrations on May 25 will mark the high point of a growing mass movement against the attacks of the French government. Millions of workers will show their determination to fight an unprecedented assault on pensions and basic social services.

The government offensive centers on pension "reforms" that will reduce benefits by 30 to 50 percent, the transfer of 110,000 jobs from the National Education system to local government, combined with 25,000 public education staff cuts, and a drastic retrenchment in health care, particularly for the elderly.

The "reforms" proposed by President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin represent a fundamental assault on the entire structure of social welfare benefits initiated in the aftermath of the Second World War. Workers face a struggle not against this or that politician or proposal, but against the Chirac-Raffarin government itself and the corporate elite for which it speaks.

The movement in opposition to these attacks must be broadened and deepened to actively mobilize workers in private industry as well as the public sector, pensioners as well as students and youth, and immigrant as well as native-born workers. For this movement to succeed, however, it must be guided by a clear understanding of the driving forces behind these attacks and a thoroughly worked-out political strategy based on this understanding.

It is necessary to issue a frank warning. Militant protests and even strike action alone will not secure the jobs and social conditions of the working class in the face of the determination of the ruling elite to dismantle all of its past social gains. This is a political struggle pitting one class—the broad mass of working people—against its opposite—the corporate and financial elite and the most wealthy and privileged layers of the population. It is driven by a global crisis of the capitalist system that has already produced the violent eruption of US imperialism in Afghanistan and Iraq, open conflict between Washington and its ostensible

allies in Europe, a massive attack on democratic rights in every country, and a deepening recession that threatens to descend into global deflation and depression.

The greatest disservice is done by all those—union officials, politicians, opportunists on the so-called extreme left—who deny that this is a political struggle. The blunt fact is that the working class faces a struggle whose conscious goal must be not to pressure or shift the Chirac-Raffarin government, or even to replace it with another bourgeois government of the official left parties, but rather to take political power into its own hands. Only in this way can working people reorganize economic life along genuinely democratic and egalitarian lines, so that the resources produced by workers can be developed and distributed to meet their needs.

The growing chasm between rich and poor and the assault on social services are not peculiar to France. Workers all over the world are confronted with the same basic attacks. In the United States and Britain the polarization of wealth has already been taken much further. From Reagan to Bush and from Thatcher to Blair, workers' living standards have fallen while the rich amassed ever greater fortunes.

In Europe, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder has launched the most far-ranging attacks ever on the German Social Security system with his "Agenda 2010." Schröder, leader of the French Socialist Party's sister party, the SDP, is carrying out similar attacks to those of Chirac and Raffarin.

The problem is a global one. As in other countries, the Chirac-Raffarin government and the corporate elite that stand behind it are trying to make the working class pay for the crisis of the world economy. It is only on the basis of a strategy to unite the working class across all national boundaries as a political force independent of bourgeois society that workers can fight to take power and resolve this crisis in the interests of the vast majority.

The fight for this perspective requires above all a break with the old and discredited parties of the left and the building of a new political party on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme.

The most important political experiences that workers have gone through in the last 35 years demonstrate the futility of struggles that remain within the limits of a national outlook combined with trade-unionist pressure on the corporate and political establishment. In May-June 1968 there were over 10 million workers on a political strike against Charles De Gaulle's government and the Fifth Republic itself. The Communist Party

and CGT trade union carried out a historic betrayal, refusing to bring down the Gaullist regime and instead calling off the strike movement in return for a few paltry concessions. De Gaulle and, after him, Georges Pompidou, lost no time in undermining these gains in the years that followed.

In the intervening years there were many mass social movements against the various “governments of the left” presided over by François Mitterrand. All of these ended in deals brokered by the union leadership that left the basic attacks in place: the closing of the steel industry in the early 1980s, the speedup and sackings in the car industry two years later, to name but two.

Finally, the mass strike of public service workers in November-December 1995 brought the government of Alain Juppé to the brink of collapse. The trade unions, however, accepted a deal that not only left Juppé’s attacks on the Social Security system in place, but also those carried out in 1993 by the previous prime minister, Edouard Balladur, on the pensions of workers in private industry. The extension of private sector workers’ contributions from 37.5 to 40 years is now used to justify extending the public service workers’ pension contribution period in the same way.

The balance sheet of the pressure politics pursued by the political parties of the left and the trade unions is one of betrayal and defeat. Every concession by these leaders leads to new concessions. Workers have seen their living standards and conditions undermined systematically for thirty years. Now Chirac proposes to take their pensions, education and health care too.

The main obstacles to the struggle are the long-outlived bureaucracies in the workers’ movement: the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and the trade union apparatus. They are joined by those opportunist organizations that cover up for them and deflect all criticism from them: Alain Krivine’s Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), Arlette Laguiller’s Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and Pierre Lambert’s Parti des Travailleurs (PT).

In the current struggle, none of them dare speak the truth. Apart from some holiday speeches at their recent congress, the Socialist Party has been unwilling to even raise a finger against Raffarin’s measures.

Lionel Jospin’s Socialist Party and Communist Party government, coming to power after Balladur’s pension “reforms” and Juppé’s attacks on the Social Services, repealed not one of these measures in its five years in office. None of the trade unions opposed this betrayal.

It was the anti-working class policies of the Jospin government that paved the way for the large vote for the fascist Le Pen in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections. The reaction of the Socialist Party and Communist Party was to campaign for the election of Chirac as president. They opposed any struggle to project a working class political alternative to the parties of the bourgeois right. They therefore bear political responsibility for all of the anti-working class measures that Chirac has since carried out.

All of the parties of the official left continue to claim that the issues raised by the offensive of Chirac and Raffarin can be resolved by putting pressure on the regime. The Communist Party (PCF) claim that they’ve “done their arithmetic” and it is possible to resolve the pensions issue. The LCR declares, “It’s possible to

finance the pensions.” LO says that “together we can push the government back.”

They are not only politically disarming the working class, but also providing a smokescreen for the trade unions to dissipate and abort the struggle so as to avoid a confrontation with the government.

The treachery of the union officialdom is already demonstrated in the decision of the CFDT leadership to accept the government’s pension proposal. For his part, CGT head Bernard Thibault has ruled out any official industrial action until after May 28, when the pension reform will be put before parliament. He has completely disowned the Paris urban transport workers’ strike, which has disrupted movement in the capital.

Marc Blondel, leader of the Force Ouvrière union, demonstrates in the clearest terms the determination of the trade union leaders to avoid a political struggle with the government. In a recent interview he was asked if he planned to call a general strike. He replied, “No... This notion of the general strike always takes on a political complexion. I am not in a fight with Raffarin, but against [Social Affairs Minister] Fillon’s reform of the pensions.”

Foreshadowing his intention to call off the struggle entirely, he told *Agence France Presse* on 19 May, “I feel that we’re in the last week of the trade union struggle...from May 25th and beyond the issue will become a parliamentary struggle between the majority and the opposition. That’s not my problem.”

French workers must unite with workers internationally in a struggle based on a common programme that imposes social ownership of the basic productive forces and a redistribution of wealth under the democratic control of the working class. This requires the building of a new international workers’ party that fights for a socialist perspective.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, the daily Internet publication of the International Committee of the Fourth International, serves as the means for the building of such a party. We call upon all participants in these demonstrations to read the WSWS, establish contact with the editorial board, and contribute to the development of our work.



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